

THE CHEROKEE INDIANS

Tennessee's First Citizens



Long before the first Europeans began to settle the area that we call Tennessee, the land was inhabited by several Native American tribes. Among these were the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Creek, Mississippian, and Shawnee. Each tribe had its own unique culture.

During different periods different tribes occupied parts of Tennessee. From about 13,000 BC to around 5000 BC, Tennessee was occupied by the Paleo Indians. The Archaic occupied the area between 6000 BC to 1000 BC. They were responsible for creating mussel shell mounds along the Cumberland River. The Woodland Indians of 1000 BC to about 1100 AD were known as Mound Builders, and the Mississippian period Indians occupied the area from 1100 AD to 1600 AD.

Archaeologists have determined that Tennessee was first occupied by the Indians during the last Ice Age around 15,000 years ago. Over the millennia, occupation focused on the rich valleys of the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers and their tributaries. The Cherokee, who by 1700 had claimed the lands north to the Ohio River, west to the western Tennessee River valley, south to include the northern portions of the present states of Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina, and east to present-day western North Carolina.

The Cherokee's story is one of survival, perseverance, and adaptability against many forces of change. Their deplorable treatment and particularly their forced removal from the state in 1838 through the "Trail of Tears" is a low point in American history.

The Cherokee people did not, however, disappear. They are today a proud and productive people found in the Cherokee Nation and the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians in Oklahoma, and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in western North Carolina. Many Tennesseans have Cherokee in their ancestry.

With the creation of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) in 1933, there arose an immediate concern for the thousands of prehistoric and historic Native American sites that would be inundated by reservoirs along the Tennessee River and its tributaries. In 1934, the University of Tennessee (and the University of Alabama) entered into agreements with TVA to conduct archaeological surveys, investigations, and excavations in the reservoir areas to be impacted, prior to their inundation.

From 1934 to 1942, ten reservoirs were constructed on the Tennessee River and its tributaries, and archaeological work was conducted in nine of them -- Norris, Wheeler, Pickwick, Gunter'sville, Chickamauga, Watts Bar, Fort Loudon, Douglas, Cherokee, and Kentucky Reservoirs. No archaeological work was done in the Cherokee Reservoir. Hundreds of sites were recorded, and archaeologists from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, exposed and excavated more than 1.5 million square feet of prehistoric and historic Native American occupations.



Cedar Log Steps 1934

Excavations at the Cox Site in Anderson County, Tennessee, exposed cedar log steps leading to the summit of a Mississippian Period mound.

The results of these massive investigations, along with subsequent work in other reservoirs -- such as Nickajack, Tims Ford, Barkley, Melton Hill, Normandy, Columbia, and Tellico -- are housed at the University of Tennessee. The McClung Museum and the Department of Anthropology maintain a research collection of several million artifacts collected during professional archaeological excavations of sites in Tennessee. These -- along with the associated field notes, forms, analysis sheets, drawings, photographs, and correspondence -- comprise a research base for southeastern Indian studies of international significance. The material forms one of the most important research collections in the eastern United States, and many of the objects rank among the finest examples of prehistoric Native American art representing the 15,000-year occupation of Tennessee by Native Americans.

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